

The Source: Photographs of Civil War Battlefields and Military Life, 1861-1866

MILITARY PORTRAITS

Many soldiers posed in uniform for formal portraits before they left home. Photographers also brought their cameras to military camps near battlefields, to capture armies at work.

1

James F. Gibson, "Lieut. Washington, a Confederate Prisoner, and Capt. Custer, U.S.A.," 1862

This photograph, published in one of Alexander Gardner's catalogs, has an interesting history. Confederate lieutenant James Barroll Washington (left) was taken prisoner during McClellan's Peninsula Campaign in Virginia. Captain George Armstrong Custer (right), a Union officer who would achieve fame at Gettysburg a year later (and a different kind of notoriety at Little Big Horn in 1876), was an old friend of Washington's. Upon finding the two chatting amiably, James Gibson decided to photograph them. Washington called out for a young African American boy to join them. An illustration based on this image subsequently appeared in *Harper's Weekly* under the title "Both Sides, the Cause."

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



2

Mathew Brady, "Gen. Robert B. Potter and Staff of Seven, Recognized Capt. Gilbert H. McKibben, Capt. Wright, A.A.G. Also Mr. Brady, Photographer," c. 1863

Brady owed his reputation in the 1850s to photographing famous people, so it is not surprising that during the war, he devoted much of his work on the battlefield to taking pictures of officers and their staffs. A relentless self-promoter, he also had a penchant for inserting himself into his own work. General Potter is the bareheaded figure at the center of this image. Brady, in civilian clothes, leans against a tree to the right.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration.



3

Photographer Unknown, "Portrait of a Soldier Group," c. 1861–1865

Soldiers often posed for portraits, either individually or in groups. Sometimes, as one soldier does here, they posed with weapons as well. Note that two of the figures in this portrait are holding hands, a sign of intimacy that although rare in such photographs was not scandalous either.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-B8184-10694 DLC (b&w film copy neg.).



4

***Alexander Gardner, "President Lincoln on
Battle-Field of Antietam," 1862***

Gardner took this photograph when President Lincoln traveled to Antietam in October 1862 to confer with General McClellan. McClellan is to the left of Lincoln, standing in profile and facing the president. McClellan's staff forms an arc around the two figures.

Source: Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.



BATTLEFIELD LANDSCAPES AND CITYSCAPES

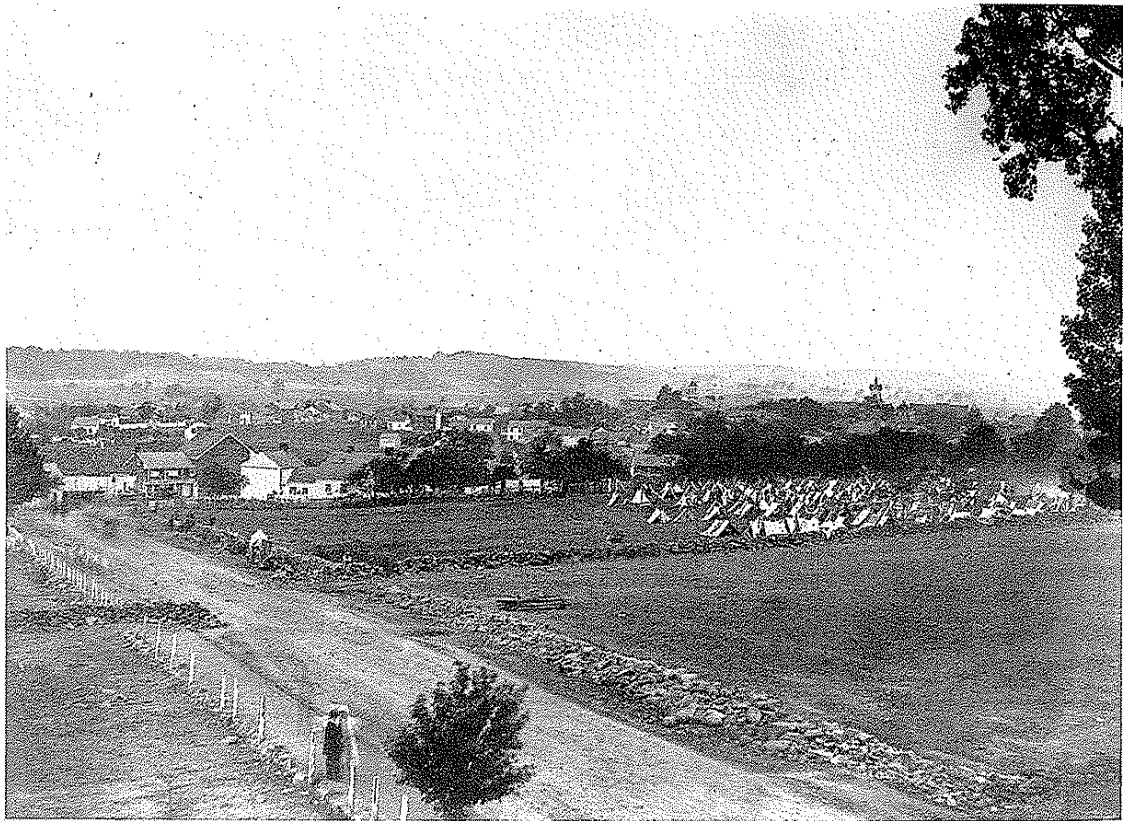
Photographers often took pictures of battlefield landscapes and cityscapes, juxtaposing civilian and military life or depicting the destructive effects of the war.

5

Timothy O'Sullivan, "Pennsylvania, Gettysburg 07/1863," 1863

O'Sullivan worked with Gardner in photographing the Gettysburg battlefield. This image, taken from a hill south of the town's center, shows the small remnant of a military camp after most of the Union and Confederate forces had withdrawn. During the Civil War, many small towns saw their farms and fields occupied by armies that dwarfed the local population.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration.



6

George P. Barnard, "Ruins of Charleston, S.C.," 1866

Photographer George P. Barnard documented the devastating impact of war on the South. This image shows one of the South's greatest cities in ruins, with solitary human figures scattered about, contemplating the destruction.

Source: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



AFRICAN AMERICANS IN MILITARY LIFE

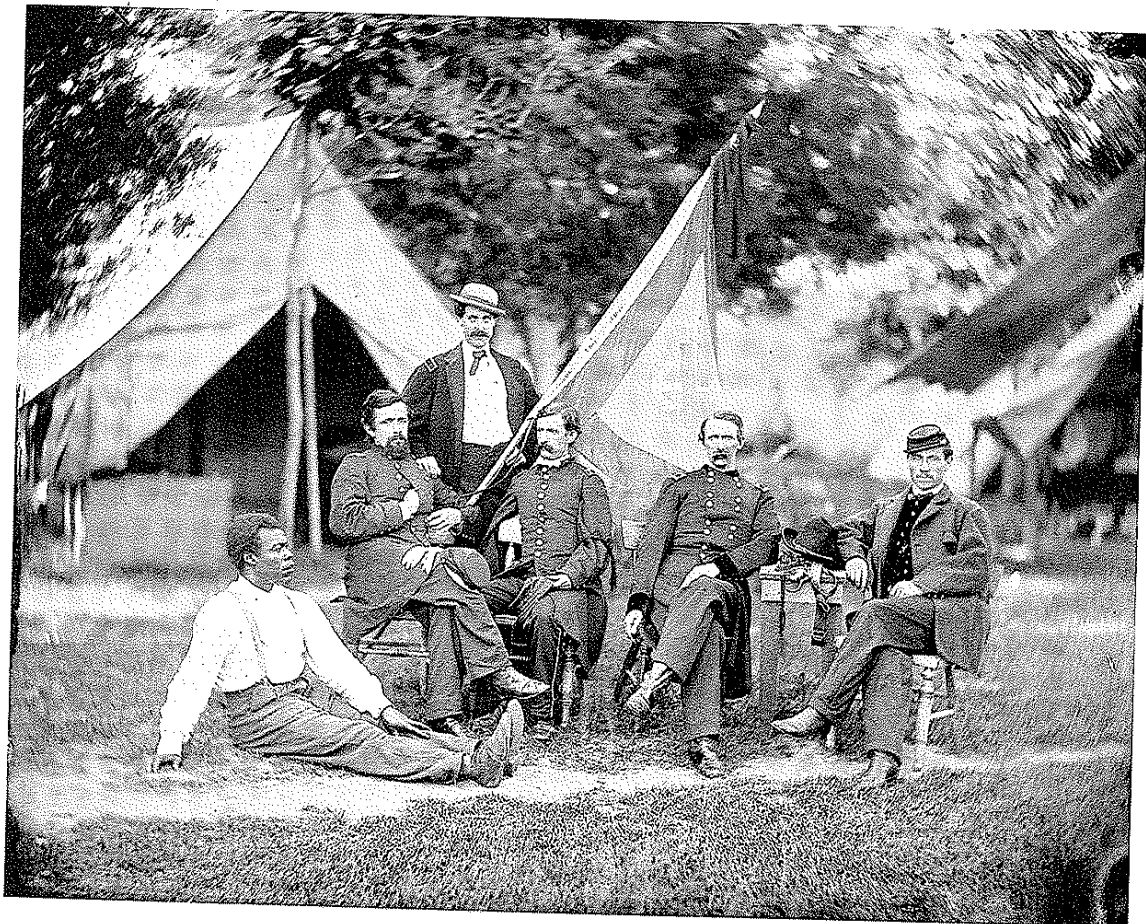
African Americans, free and enslaved, worked on and near Civil War battlefields as soldiers and laborers. Slaves who ran away from their masters and sought refuge with the Union army were known as "contrabands." Before the Emancipation Proclamation, they occupied a limbo between freedom and slavery. Union officers did not have the legal authority to free them, but neither did they wish to return them to their former homes, where their labor might benefit the Confederate war effort. Many contrabands ended up in battlefield and camp photographs.

7

Mathew Brady, "Portrait of Brig. Gen. Napoleon B. McLaughlin, Officer of the Federal Army, and Staff, Vicinity of Washington, D.C.," 1861

This photograph from early in the war is typical of Brady's portraits of Union officers and their staffs (see Source 2 in this chapter). Sometimes these portraits included African Americans, posed in subservient positions to indicate their status as servants.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

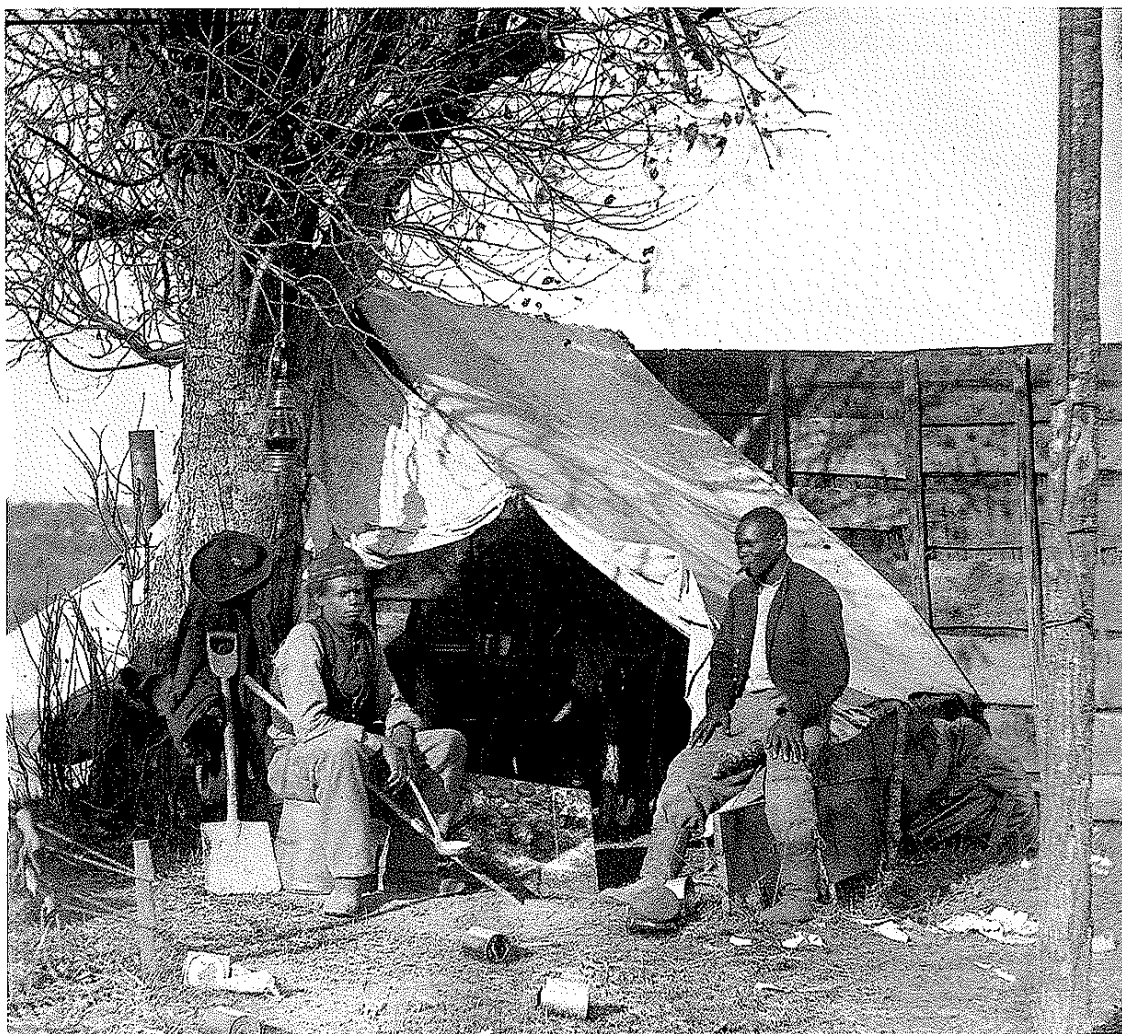


8

Timothy O'Sullivan, "Culpeper, Va. 'Contrabands,'" 1863

African Americans worked for Union and Confederate armies in a number of capacities. These two men are pictured outside of a cook's tent at a Union camp.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

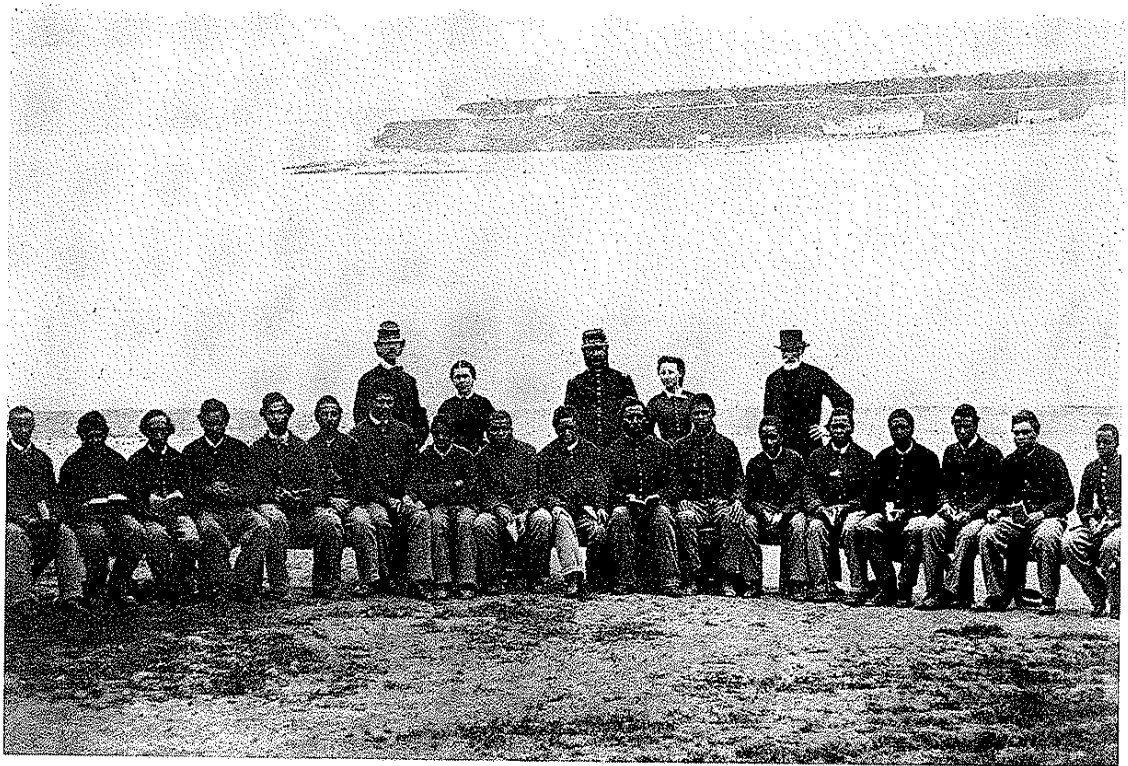


9

***Photographer Unknown, "African American Soldiers
with Their Teachers and Officers," date unknown***

Many African Americans, including contrabands, enlisted in the Union army and were photographed in uniform. These recruits posed with their white commanding officers and female teachers. Instead of bearing arms, the recruits hold books.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



BATTLEFIELD DEAD

Battlefield dead made up only a tiny fraction of Civil War photographs, but they became some of the most enduring visual images of the war. To take them, a photographer had to arrive on the battlefield before corpses were buried, usually within two days of the fighting. Gardner's and O'Sullivan's photographs from Antietam and Gettysburg are the most famous of this category, but equally powerful ones were taken after other battles in the war's eastern theater, including Cold Harbor and Petersburg, both in Virginia.

10

Alexander Gardner, "Antietam, Md. Bodies of Dead Gathered for Burial," 1862

This image, one of the Antietam series exhibited in Mathew Brady's New York gallery, presents a line of corpses arranged as if in formation. No single soldier is identified; they appear as an anonymous mass. The line running across the photograph is from a crack in the original glass plate.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

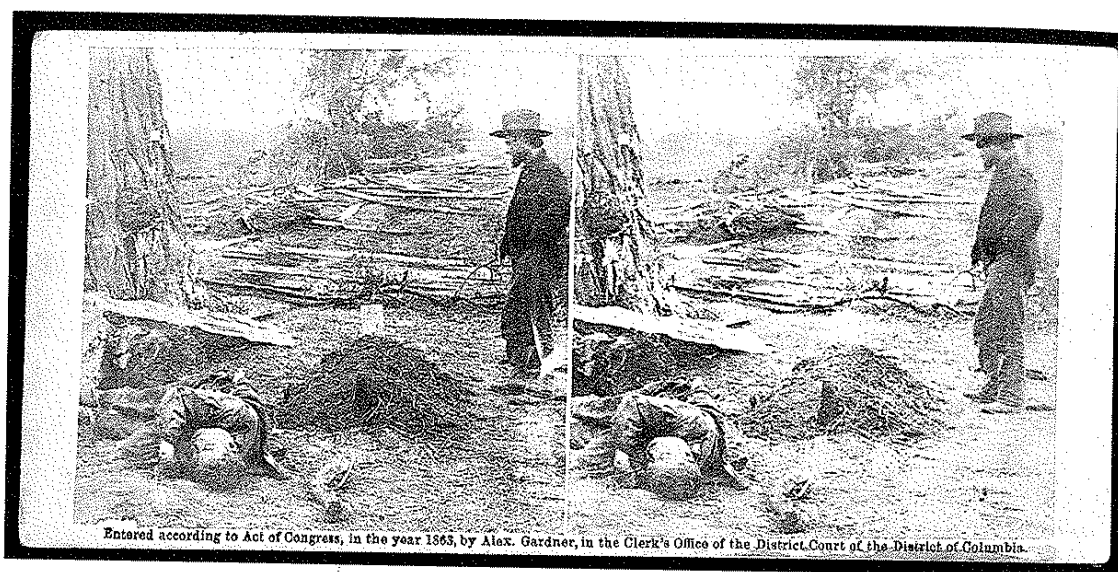


11

Alexander Gardner, "A Contrast. Federal Buried; Confederate Unburied, Where They Fell on the Battle Field of Antietam," 1862

This is a stereograph of one of Gardner's Antietam photographs. It juxtaposes the marked grave of Union officer John A. Clark with the unburied corpse of an anonymous Confederate.

Source: Collection of the New-York Historical Society, id number ad18001.



12

Alexander Gardner, "He Sleeps His Last Sleep," 1862

As he did with the image shown in Source 11, Gardner sold stereographs and album cards of this Antietam photograph via his catalog. Unlike most of his other photographs of the dead from the Battle of Antietam, this one shows a single casualty far removed from any other fallen soldiers. Gardner's catalog caption for this image read: "A Confederate Soldier, who after being wounded, had evidently dragged himself to a little ravine on the hill-side, where he died."

Source: Collection of the New-York Historical Society, id number ad04002.



13

James F. Gibson, "Battlefield of Gettysburg—Body of a Soldier in 'the Wheat Field,' Evidently Killed by the Explosion of a Shell," 1863

Photographers manipulated their subjects, even dead ones, to achieve the desired effect. Gibson accompanied Gardner to Gettysburg to take photographs after the battle. In his catalog, Gardner described this anonymous soldier as a sharpshooter, but a sharpshooter would not have affixed a bayonet to his weapon. Also, by the time photographers reached battlefield corpses, their weapons had usually been collected by the victorious army or by scavengers. The weapon shown here is a "prop gun" placed there by Gibson or Gardner; it shows up in several of their Gettysburg photographs. The photographer has also placed an unexploded shell near the corpse's right knee to suggest the source of the horrible wound in the abdomen. It is more likely that a pig fed on the body shortly after death. The dismembered hand and canteen in the right foreground are also likely props.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



14

Timothy O'Sullivan, "Field Where General Reynolds Fell, Gettysburg," 1863

This image from the Gettysburg battlefield stands in sharp contrast to the caption Gardner chose for it. Reynolds was the highest-ranking Union officer killed at Gettysburg and became in death one of the battle's heroes. This image offers no trace of Reynolds (in fact, he was killed in a wooded area), only anonymous, bloodied, and bloated corpses.

Source: Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

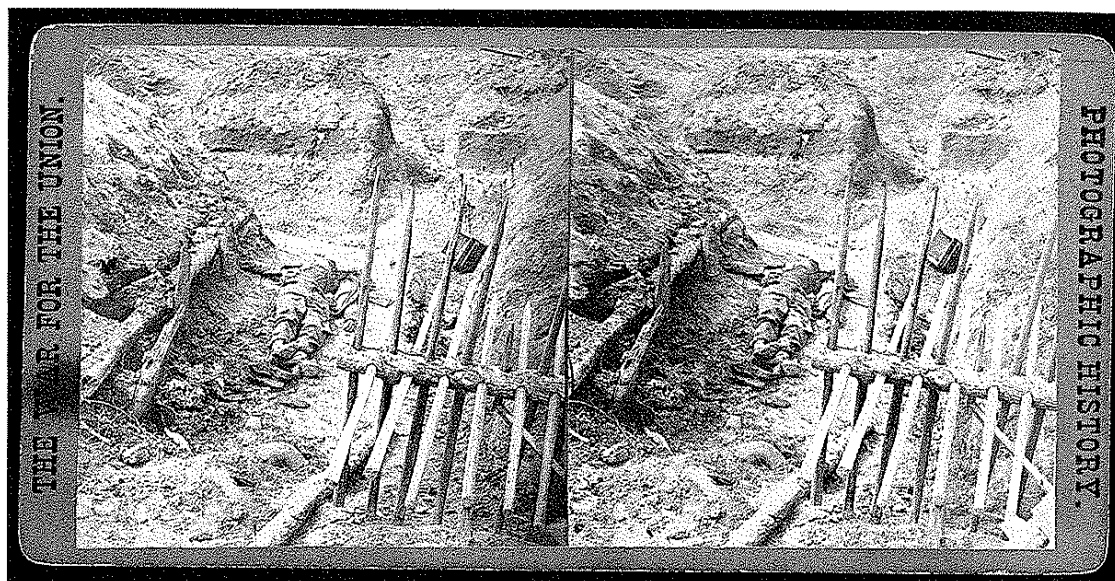


15

T. C. Roche, "... View of the Covered Ways inside the Rebel Fort Mahone, Called by the Soldiers 'Fort Damnation' ... Taken the Morning after the Storming of Petersburg, Va. 1865," 1865

T. C. Roche, a former cameraman for Mathew Brady, documented the Union army's assault on Petersburg, a vital railroad junction in Virginia, in April 1865. This stereographic image of a solitary Confederate soldier lying dead in one of the trenches built to defend the city anticipates the photographs that would document trench warfare in World War I. The spiked device in the foreground is a cheval-de-frise, a type of movable fortification designed to slow an enemy advance.

Source: Collection of the New-York Historical Society, id number ad41018.



16

John Reekie, "Cold Harbor, Va. African Americans Collecting Bones of Soldiers Killed in Battle," 1865

John Reekie was a cameraman for Alexander Gardner and worked with him documenting the final weeks of the war in Virginia in 1865. In this photograph, a burial party made up of African American males is collecting and interring the skeletal remains of soldiers who had died on the Cold Harbor battlefield almost a year earlier. The figures working in the background suggest that Reekie has captured them "in action," but bear in mind that the exposure time required for such a photograph would have meant that they were posed. Likewise, the skull on the far left appears to have been posed to stare directly at the photograph's viewer. The glass plate used to make this image has been damaged, as evidenced by the crack across the photograph and the missing shard on the right-hand side.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

